

# Gladys Nilsson Paints Like She People-Watches

BY ELLA HUZENIS February 21, 2020

Gladys Nilsson, the 79-year-old Chicago-based painter, loves a crowd. Well, “I don’t like to be in crowds,” she clarifies. “But I like to watch crowds.” As an avid people-watcher, the dynamics of strangers intermingling in public spaces have inspired Nilsson’s work for the last fifty years. Her love of people is fully on display in her current gallery retrospective, *Honk! Fifty Years of Painting*, at the Matthew Marks and Garth Greenan galleries in New York’s Chelsea.

At both locations, vibrant compositions bubble with life. Her characters—some distinctly human, others animal, and the rest ambiguously in-between—engage one another in bizarre, spectacular landscapes: playing, fighting, flirting. Nilsson’s paintings and drawings reflect the cheeky, psychedelic exaggerations often associated with Hairy Who, the art collective she was part of in the late-’60s with five other alumni of the School of the Art Institute of Chicago. Her approach, however, is unique in its keen focus on human relationships. Nilsson’s works, which are rendered on canvas, plexiglass, and paper, are universes in themselves, formed from an imagination driven by a fierce fascination with all variations of the body.

As viewers might guess, the amount of energy Nilsson invests in each work doesn’t allow much opportunity for dwelling. Each painting, lovingly constructed, demands her complete devotion: “My pieces get very jealous if attention wanders, and you have to assure them,” she says. “You have to calm their nerves a bit, so to speak.” For Nilsson, who attended the gallery opening with her husband, the artist and fellow Hairy Who member Jim Nutt, the exhibition offered a surprising look-back. She walked us through some of the works, and how she’s kept painting interesting for herself over the last fifty years.



Acrylic on panel in artist’s frame, 13 1/8 x 15 3/4 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery

## “HONK” (1964)

“I definitely don’t think about the very early work in the first room. So it’s like, ‘Oh gee, look what I did there.’ I mean, that’s so raw in comparison to the very latest work . . . the kinds of exaggerations used in the figure, the simplicity of the palette. My palette has expanded enormously over the years. So there’s a rawness in how my technique was at that time, in how I was drawing.

I’m assuming this painting is where the show’s title comes from, and I looked at it because I thought, ‘Honk? Well that’s a strange name. I wonder where they got that from?’ And then I got to the show and I looked at [the painting], and I thought, ‘Well, that makes perfect sense.’ Here are all these people, and they’ve got these little horns in their mouths and they’re all old, even though they have yellow hair, and they’ve got canes. Everybody is facing everybody else, and it’s like some kind of quasi-mirror-image. So *Honk*, I guess, had a logic to it in terms of the show title. It’s kind of bizarre. I mean, it certainly attracts attention. ‘Why is that show called *Honk*?’ What a strange name for a show. Then I was thinking, well, ‘Honk! Get out of my way!’

I don’t know which side is honking to get out of the way, but yeah, they’re not moving. They have reached a stalemate. ‘Honk’ is a lot more interesting than ‘Stalemate’ as a title. Although, ‘Stalemate’—I might write that down and ponder it.”



Ink on paper, 12 1/2 x 19 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery

## “UNTITLED (STANDING)” (1969)

“I love paper and I have so much paper. I probably don’t need to buy paper for the rest of my life because I was continually getting paper when it was on sale.

Black paper is really interesting, or black canvas for that matter.

If you’ve ever painted on black velvet, like those Elvis paintings that you would see on intersections—someone sets up to sell Elvis paintings. But I guess it’s really curious because it reverses all of the known factors that you don’t even think about when you do a line drawing on a white piece of paper.

Those silver ink drawings came out of really liking Aboriginal bark paintings, where you’re seeing a pattern drawn that depicts as much of the skeletal parts of a kangaroo as, say, the kangaroo itself. The Aboriginal bark paintings, all through school and after I got out of school, were things that I would just think about, like any artist thinks about things that have become source materials. Except with the bark painting—I didn’t know how it was going to come out from me and how I would use the ideas that I had been thinking about in them. And then for whatever reason, one day I thought, ‘Oh, well that seems simple. I’ll just do some silver ink drawings on black paper.’ And I really, really like working on it.

I like to present myself with different things to solve. You work over and over and over again on things that become your primary method. What each space requires is different, and I like to give myself a kind of pause to think about in any given work. If color becomes repetitious, then I make a point of having something slightly different in the next piece. It becomes interesting to me to shift relationships. ‘How far can I push this limited palette so that it still interests me?’ And, you know, I have to continue interesting myself.”



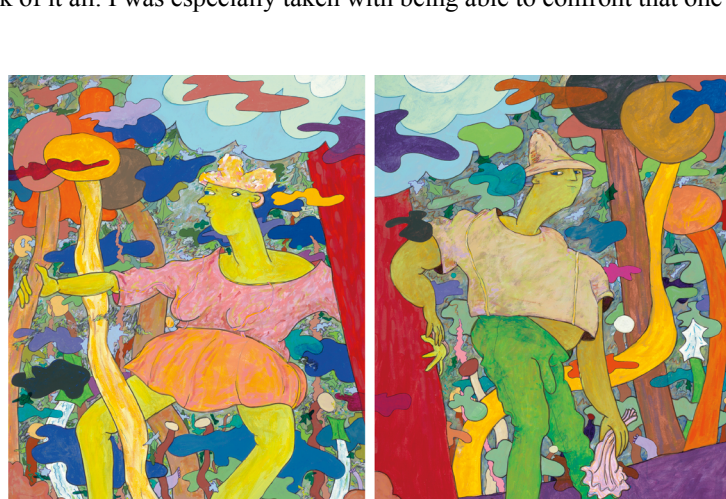
Acrylic on canvas in artist’s frame, two panels, each: 85 1/2 x 49 1/2 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery

## “DIPPED DICK, ADAM AND EVE AFTER CRANACH” (1971)

“The canvas paintings were all done in California. We had a three-bedroom ranch style in a very suburban area across from the college where my husband got a job offer and then I had a few pick-up classes. But aside from a few pieces that I do remember working on, like the big old diptych that’s in the last room at the Marks gallery, I have no memory of them really. The diptych, I remember putting together, and my admiration of [Lucas] Cranach [the Elder]’s painting, which is where that one comes straight out of. In museums, I spent a lot of time looking at the older works and how things were drawn, like Cranach or [Hans] Holbein [the Younger], et cetera. With the Cranach ‘Adam and Eve’ painting, how it just had these two people in this dense landscape, and how then life began after that. I liked that particular painting.

Jim and I were talking about that because he was painting on canvas at that time, and we were both represented in Chicago. So obviously the works had to go from point A to point B, but it’s like, “Well geez, how did we ever ship those things? What happened? Did they just throw them on the back of a truck without care? Did somebody throw them on the top of the car, and you drove with them with one hand out the window holding onto them?”

The density of the paintings was going on in them. My work has always had a certain kind of density in terms of shapes and colors and figuration and so on. But those paintings to me were super dense, especially the big diptych. I couldn’t believe how much I had put into it and how I kept track of it all. I was especially taken with being able to confront that one again.”



Acrylic on canvas, 48 x 74 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery

## “A RED TREE” (2018)

“My studio is on the third floor. It has a very narrow staircase. And the back of our car only holds canvases up to a certain size, which is where the ‘Red Tree’ size came from. I really like having the tree in the middle, and the tree divides the two people that are in it. It forms an edge of the painting, you know what I mean? She, in that one, is reaching around, and you can see her hand on the other side of the tree, which is the only link between the two people in that panel. I like diptychs. I think they’re kind of fun.

Maybe I was in retrospect thinking back to how much I really liked working on the Cranach painting, and then sort of replicating it in more modern situations. Bringing up my characters into a situation where they might be confronted by a mystic landscape.

As time has gone on, one is very familiar with how one draws things so that a lot of times the initial drawing might be different one from another, but there are relationships that do carry over. One work into the next. In the early-to-mid-’80s, I did a whole group of watercolors based on Botticelli’s ‘Birth of Venus,’ taking it through a variety of scenarios that would make no sense to Botticelli at all, but did to me: old Venus, wrinkled Venus, Venus on a bender. I had all kinds of different scenarios and ways of presenting that particular drawing. And with the tree paintings—looking up at the Marks diptych and then thinking about the Greenan diptych—one flowed into the other with about a 45-year interim.”



Acrylic on canvas, 60 x 36 inches. © Gladys Nilsson, courtesy Garth Greenan Gallery and Matthew Marks Gallery

## “BOATING” (2018)

“Well, the female figure has taken over because the older I get, the more I think back on the women in my life—aunties and grandmas and cousins and that kind of thing. And the older I get, the older I look. You know, people joke about, ‘Well, everything is wrinkled and sagging and bagging and all of that kind of stuff.’ I’ve always thought it was kind of fun, inadvertently exploring what stage I am in life. More or less, all the female figures now magically have gray and white hair, whereas they didn’t use to. Women work real hard, and they’re the backbone, and now I’m celebrating that kind of thing by really using them as the main thrust.

All the characters have very good relationships, and what starts a painting could be a gesture, a posture that I can remember seeing, and I want to explore. I collect postures, I watch people, what they’re doing and how they interact with one another. I invent interaction, and I elaborate on it. I have always been very free to bend and twist people into impossible ways of standing or falling or sitting.

I love to just watch people. I leave my front door and I walk down the street, and I see a mom pushing her stroller to get the oldest kid to daycare or kindergarten or something, and how they’re interacting. Usually it’s, ‘I don’t want to go.’ ‘Well you have to go.’ Or, I’m sitting at my library where I go everyday to look at magazines and such, and I just see what people are doing there. Or I’m at the grocery store and I see how people are milling about. I just like the dynamic of crowds. I don’t like to be in crowds, but I like to watch crowds.

I come from a blue-collar background, and there was a lot to be said for getting through the day. I mean, there’s a lot to be said for any strata of life getting through the day. The executive gets through the day in a way that’s different than the factory worker. I know how hard my dad worked, and my mom, and I just like to celebrate little things, which can be just a quart of milk. I just like seeing how people manage. You’re in the department store at Christmas season, and people are being worn out and then they get excited because they see the sweater that Aunt Susie would be perfect in. And that peps them up. You know?”